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ABSTRACT

This article describes Readers Theater (a form of group storytelling in which two or more readers present a piece of literature by reading aloud from hand-held scripts) and advocates its use in the classroom. The paper's seven sections are as follows: (1) What is Readers Theater; (2) Readers Theater and Its Conventions (discussing scripts, positioning, action, focus, voice, props and costumes, music and sound effects, and lighting); (3) The Process of Script Adaptation (what to look for, where to begin looking, and adaptation); (4) Copyright--A Publisher's Approach; (5) Some Hints for Successful Presentations (blocking, holding the script, audience participation, economy of movement, miscues, props, advertising the source, and intimacy); (6) The Advantages of Readers Theater; and (7) Conclusion. Seventeen references are provided. (SR)

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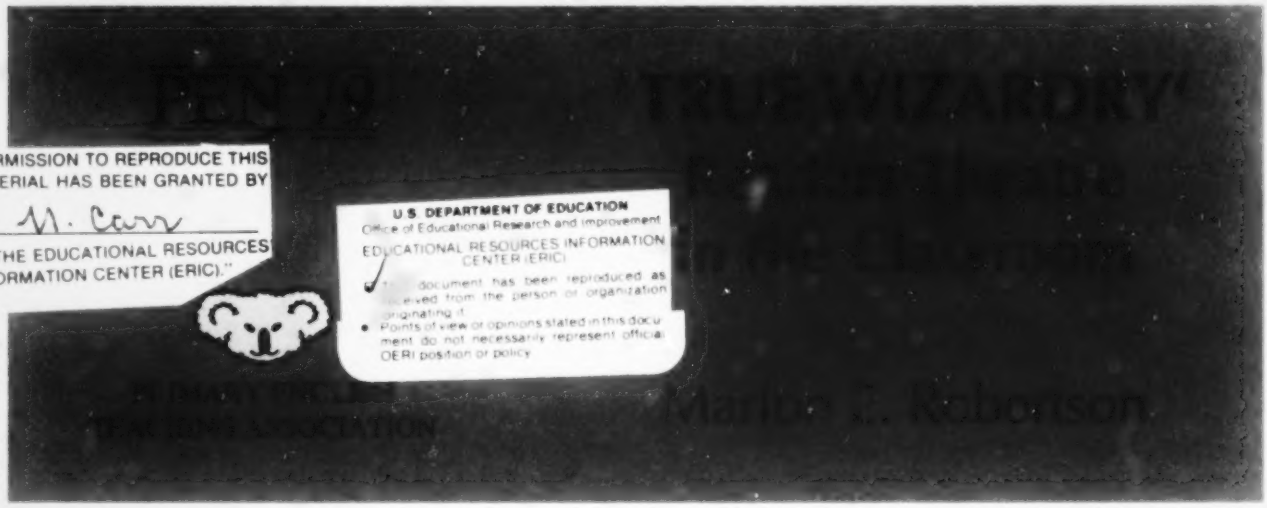


WHAT IS READERS THEATRE?

Readers Theatre has been variously described as 'Theatre of the mind' and 'Theatre of the imagination' (Coger & White 1982, p. 2), and as 'the fastest growing innovation in art and education' (Adams 1986, p. 3). These descriptions are all apt enough, but what exactly is Readers Theatre? In a nutshell, it is a form of group storytelling in which two or more readers present a piece of literature by reading aloud from hand-held scripts. The piece of literature may be a poem, a play, a short story, a picture book or an excerpt from a novel.

Readers Theatre reaches out to the audience, coaxing the collective imagination to enter directly into the world of the literature. A Readers Theatre performance has few of the external trappings of traditional drama, such as costumes and props, and therefore the focus of the listener is not on the actors but on the language.

Readers Theatre is a delicious concoction of storytelling, drama and entertainment, with a generous jigger of good old-fashioned fun – a potent cocktail which Coger and White (1982, p.13) stress '*is not* intended to be a critical analysis of the text but an aesthetic and enjoyable experience.' Its potential value in the classroom has been summed up by Shirlee Sloyer (1982, p. 3): 'as a thinking, reading and writing experience Readers Theatre makes a unique contribution to our language arts curriculum.'

READERS THEATRE AND ITS CONVENTIONS

While Readers Theatre contains indentitiable elements of drama and storytelling, it also exhibits a number of characteristics which make it unique.

Scripts

Performers always read aloud from hand-held scripts. This makes Readers Theatre a perfect vehicle for children. There is no fear of the dreaded 'I've forgotten my lines' syndrome that so often mars the school Christmas play, and the use of scripts reduces preparation time as well as readers' insecurities. Ideally scripts should be typed double-spaced with wide margins, and each one should have the reader's lines highlighted for ease of reading. They should be stapled, pasted or taped securely in covers or manila folders.

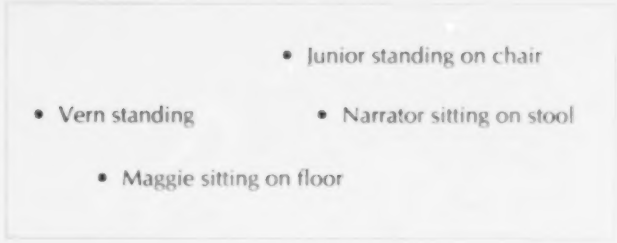
Since Readers Theatre does away with most of the stage trappings of the traditional play, the audience needs some alternative visual cues to the theme of the performance or the identity of the characters. One very simple way of providing such cues is to use the scripts as props: for example, a script about intergalactic cowboys might be covered in silver foil with the silhouette of a cactus on the front; a script for a wizard might be black with stars on it; a script for Little Red Riding Hood would probably be red, and so on.

Newsagents and department stores, with their ever-expanding range of gift wraps, are veritable treasure troves of script-covering materials. For the serious Readers Theatre buff, searching for the 'right' script cover can almost take on the urgency of a quest.

Positioning

Readers usually stand or sit on stools, boxes, ladders, chairs or on the floor. They should *never* simply stand or sit in a row, as this is not only boring for the audience but fails to make use of the limited props available. Readers should try to create a 'stage' depth. Such an arrangement is called *blocking* and attempts to suggest the geography of the literature through the positioning of the readers.

For example, in the opening scene of the Betsy Byars novel *The Not-Just-Anybody Family*, Junior Blossom is perched on the roof of the house about to test out his homemade wings. In a Readers Theatre performance the child playing Junior should be raised above the other readers on a chair or a ladder to indicate the relationship between the characters and help the listeners to imagine the situation more vividly.



Action

Action is symbolic in Readers Theatre. There should be no unnecessary movement to distract the audience from the text. For example, a character going on a journey need not actually cross the performance space but may simply walk in place. Likewise a character who has died should not be encouraged to perform a spectacular or very theatrical death scene, but should simply bow his or her head or turn away from the audience. Each action must be considered and economical.

Focus

Readers Theatre employs a technique known as *offstage focus* in which readers never look at each other when they converse, but at some distant point above the heads of the audience where their vision intersects.

Offstage focus gives the illusion that the action is happening at some imagined point out in the audience. It can also be used to establish the relationship between characters in a story. At the beginning of Shel Silverstein's picture book *The Giving Tree*, for instance, a young boy talks to an apple tree. Using offstage focus, the boy would look out and up and the tree would look out and down. As the story progresses, the boy grows into a man and the tree is cut down to a stump. Accordingly the focus would change so that the reader playing the man would now look out and down and the tree stump would look out and up. This technique clearly shows the change in height and relationship between the boy/man and the tree/stump.

As Coger and White (1982, p. 101) have observed: 'The use of offstage focus makes great demands on the concentration and creative imagination of the readers. They must actively "see" the action in the imaginary world of the place selected for the focus to cross.'

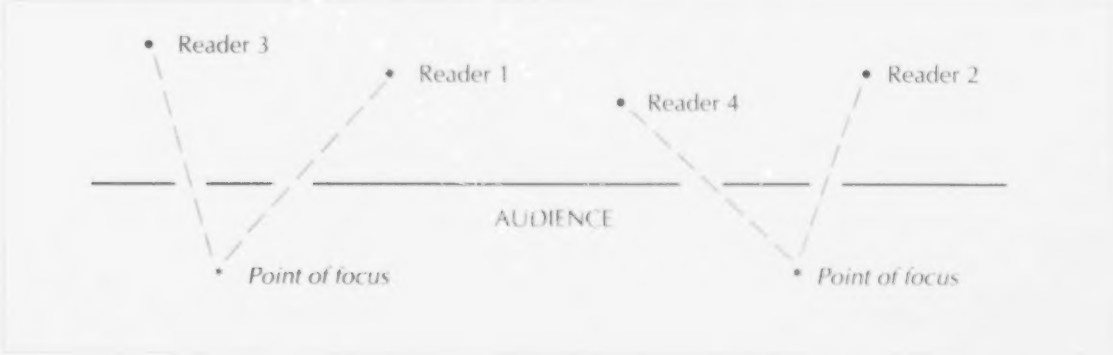
There are two more good reasons for using the offstage focus technique:

- by facing the audience readers are able to maintain their voice projection more easily
- because readers always look out to the audience the listeners feel more involved in the action of the text.

Voice

The voice is the primary tool of the Readers Theatre performer. No matter how good the script or the original material, it will fall flat if the readers do not make it sound alive and fresh. Readers must learn to add light and shade to their voices and to pick up the tonal qualities of the script. This is especially important if one reader is playing two characters – say, a witch and a young girl. How will their voices differ?

I have seen one particular group of Year 2 children present Readers Theatre on a number of occasions. Their teacher has integrated Readers Theatre into the classroom literature program and so they are quite familiar with the techniques involved. One cannot but be astounded by the interpretative ability of these children. They have become so attuned to the nuances of the literature that they are able to breathe new life into the stories they perform. They use very few props and rely almost totally on their vocal resources to create imagery and characterisation.



Props and costumes

Since the primary aim of Readers Theatre is to encourage performers and audience alike to use their imaginations, it is essential to keep props and costumes to a minimum. They may even be dispensed with altogether. However, just as script covers can help establish the identity of characters and themes for the audience, so other appropriate props or costumes may include hats, scarves, shawls, beards, baskets, masks and so on.

For example, the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* could simply wear a pair of cardboard ears; Abigail in Ruth Park's *Playing Beattie Bow* could wear a shawl and a mob-cap; the

giant in Tomie de Paola's version of *Finn McCoul: The Giant of Knockmany Hill* might just wear a beard and carry an oversize script. Having seen some Readers Theatre performances spoiled by an unnecessary clutter of costumes and props, I would suggest that no reader uses more than two. Admittedly both adults and children love to dress up, but don't make the mistake of allowing 'trimmings' to become more important than the language and symbolism of the performance.

Music and sound effects

Simple sound effects can add drama and interest to a Readers Theatre presentation but, like props and costumes, they should be used sparingly. The most useful sound effects can be achieved with percussion instruments such as kazoos, tambourines, bells, triangles, slide whistles, woodblocks, clap sticks, cymbals and drums. For example, a wizard's spell might be symbolised by a strike on the triangle, or, in Banjo Paterson's *Mulga Bill's Bicycle*, the calamitous ride into Deadman's Creek could be highlighted by a burst on the slide whistle followed by a crash of cymbals. Likewise music can be added to a Readers Theatre production if it enhances the script and does not interfere with the language.

Lighting

If a Readers Theatre presentation is to be kept at a simple level, any special effects included, such as lighting, should not try to emulate a Spielberg production. I recently saw a notable instance of justified lighting when I watched a group of about sixty primary children present a Readers Theatre version of the Haitian folktale *Toopingi* at a school concert. (The script was one I had adapted from an oral retelling by Liz Weir, Belfast Children's Librarian.) The plot revolves around the fact that Toopingi and her friends change the colour of their clothes to foil a witch – a difficult concept to show in Readers Theatre. The group had solved the problem very effectively by using a spotlight at appropriate intervals to bathe the readers in red, blue or yellow light, thus reinforcing the action in the text.

Equally successful in presenting an excerpt from Gillian Rubinstein's novel *Space Demons* was the Parramatta City Library Service's Tell-a-Tale Theatre group. They covered a large torch in green cellophane and concealed it in a black box to symbolise the video monitor. The light glowed green and eerie on Andrew Hayford's face as he played the computer game and very simply conveyed the mood of the scene.

THE PROCESS OF SCRIPT ADAPTATION

'I do not know "how" I adapt materials. I find myself nonplussed each time I approach the subject in my Readers Theatre course and after considerable bubbling about the necessity for adapting and about some of the methods I have used, etc., I find myself walking out of the class trying to look wise, yet having taught very little or nothing.'

As Elbert R. Bowen indicates (in Miller 1984), one of the most difficult aspects of Readers Theatre to explain is the evolutionary process that transforms the source literature into the completed script. This is not to imply that it is a complex operation but that, like any creative process, it is based more on instinct and intuition than on formula. Unfortunately there is no single approach, no right or wrong way to adapt something for Readers Theatre, and the end result very much depends on three factors:

- the selection process
- what you are trying to achieve through your adaptation
- the number of readers you wish to involve.

What to look for

One of the most flexible aspects of Readers Theatre is that it does not rely on one source or type of literature, and the choice of material is therefore endless. Faced with this literary smorgasbord, one of the most important decisions you have to make is what material you are going to adapt. The following guidelines may be useful in making this initial choice.

§ Select literature that will be interesting and entertaining to your readers and audience. Be realistic in your novice effects. There is a quantum leap between presenting *The Three Billy Goats Gruff* and a Patricia Wrightson novel.

§ Choose literature with rich language that lends itself to reading aloud.

§ Select literature with a plot – with a beginning, a middle and a clear-cut end. Sloyer (1982, p. 7) alludes to E. M. Forster's distinction between a story and a plot. ' "The king died and then the queen died" is a story. "The king died and then the queen died of grief" is a plot. A story keeps the audience curious. What will happen next? A plot gets them thinking: Why did it happen?'

§ Choose literature with interesting or compelling characters. There is no room in Readers Theatre presentations for lengthy character descriptions. The nature of the protagonist must be established for the audience almost immediately.

§ Look for literature with a balance between narrative and dialogue.

§ Select material which has some kind of action, either physical or psychological – for example, Michael Foreman's *All the King's Horses* with its physical action, or Pat Thomson's *Can You Hear Me, Grandad?* with its psychological conflict.

§ Don't be put off by a piece of literature with a large number of characters, such as Bob Graham's *First There Was Frances*. In Readers Theatre it is quite acceptable and appropriate for one person to read several parts.

§ Ideally a script should take no longer than 7-10 minutes to perform.

§ Children should be encouraged to take part in the selection process as it is an integral part of the total experience.

Where to begin looking

Folklore, picture books and humorous poetry all make ideal beginning material for Readers Theatre adaptation. One obvious advantage of using folktales is that they are free of copyright restrictions. Coger and White (1982, p. 172) suggest old favourites such as *The Three Bears, The Three Little Pigs* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. 'In each of these something is constantly happening; the events are familiar but still a bit strange, and the stories are full of repetition. These special qualities can serve as useful guides for seeking and selecting materials for Readers Theatre scripts to be presented to young audiences.'

Picture books are another rich source of Readers Theatre scripts. These stories are often written to be read aloud to children and so the language is usually rich, satisfying and rhythmic. Texts are generally brief and to the point and thus very easy to adapt. A well-adapted picture book can have appeal for a wide age group, from kindergarten to high school.

Poetry is probably the most easily adapted of the literary forms because of its metre. Some of the most successful Readers Theatre scripts I have seen performed have been adapted from poems. Collections such as Shel Silverstein's *Where the Sidewalk Ends* and *A Light in the Attic*, or Roald Dahl's *Revolting Rhymes*, provide a wealth of bizarre and highly amusing scripts for children.

Adaptation

When you have selected the piece of literature that is to be the basis of your script, you must decide how many readers you intend to use. You might involve an entire class of children or as few as two. Once this decision is made, the adaptation process can begin. The easiest way to demonstrate the evolution of a script is to show a sample prose text and then my Readers Theatre adaptation (see facing page).

As I said earlier, there are no right or wrong ways to adapt something for Readers Theatre, but the script format is always similar to that shown opposite. Narrative lines are allocated to readers by searching for rhyme and sound patterns in the literature. Often the sound patterns are apparent and lines will fall easily into place. At other times you may have to impose your own patterns. Dialogue is of course given to the readers who play a particular character or characters. The script is usually prepared so that readers will have a roughly equal number of lines. Sometimes they may read together as a chorus to emphasise words or phrases and give greater vocal variety.

A word of warning: when you are working with inexperienced or weak readers it is unwise to break the lines into single words. This can create an unnerving staccato effect and damage the flow of the text.

You should *never* alter words or phrases when presenting an author's work as Readers Theatre. Alterations not only contravene the literary purpose of Readers Theatre but insult the author and breach copyright. On the other hand, if you are presenting a passage from a larger work such as a novel, then it may be necessary to eliminate some episodes or lengthy descriptions in order to produce a manageable script. However, beware of skeletonising the text.

Presenting a passage from a novel (with appropriate introduction to set the scene) provides the perfect opportunity to make use of the cliff-hanger – that well-tried 'soapie' device of teasing the audience by leaving the action in the script unresolved. With luck the audience will be so far caught up in what they've heard and seen that they will feel inspired to read the whole book.

However, the most important point to remember when you are working on an adaptation is to always maintain the spirit and intent of the original literature – the rest comes with practice and experience.

COPYRIGHT – A PUBLISHER'S APPROACH

One issue which often concerns teachers and librarians working with Readers Theatre for the first time is copyright. Since it is a particularly important consideration for performances outside the classroom, I asked publisher Margaret Hamilton, of Margaret Hamilton Books, for her comments. This was her reply.

> *As a publisher, I see Readers Theatre as a very effective promotional aid for children's books. It is an entertaining way of introducing children to books and encouraging them to read. I am invariably very pleased to give permission for books to be used in this way and have thoroughly enjoyed the many performances I've seen.*
>
> *In general, I think most publishers would agree with my view, and probably would not charge a copyright fee, although they should always be approached for permission. All books are covered by an individual agreement between the publisher, author and illustrator and all are different. Permission in most cases should be readily agreed to with no further negotiations necessary – unless the text of the book is to be altered substantially, or if it is to be published or used for commercial purposes. There should always, of course, be full acknowledgement of author, illustrator and publisher of any book used.*

SOME HINTS FOR SUCCESSFUL PRESENTATIONS

Blocking

The importance of blocking has been emphasised earlier. The positioning of the readers should be determined imaginatively

THE THREE BILLY-GOATS GRUFF
a Scandanavian folktale

Once upon a time there were three billy-goats called Gruff who lived together on a mountain. But there was very little to eat on that mountain and the goats were hungry. Just across the way there was a hill covered in juicy green grass. To get to the hill the three goats had to pass over a rickety old bridge that crossed a river. But under that rickety old bridge there lived a great big ugly troll. He had eyes as big as saucers and a nose as long as a poker. One day the three billy-goats Gruff decided to go up on the hillside to feast on the fresh green grass. First of all the youngest billy-goat Gruff crossed the bridge. Trip-trop, trip-trop. 'Who trips over my bridge?' roared the Troll.

READERS

1	Narrator/Littlest Billy-goat Gruff	4	Narrator
2	Narrator/Second Billy-goat Gruff	5	Narrator
3	Narrator/Third Billy-goat Gruff	6	Narrator/Troll

1	Once upon a time
2	there were three billy-goats called Gruff
1, 2, 3	who lived together on a mountain.
4	But there was very little to eat on that mountain
5	and the goats were hungry.
6	Just across the way there was a hill covered in juicy green grass.
4	To get to the hill
6	the three goats had to pass over a rickety old bridge
1	that crossed a river.
3	But
6	under that rickety old bridge there lived
1	a great big
2	ugly
All	TROLL.
6	He had eyes as big as saucers
5	and a nose as long as a poker.
3	One day
4	the three billy-goats Gruff decided to go up on the hillside to feast on the fresh green grass.
2	First of all the youngest billy-goat Gruff crossed the bridge.
1	Trip-trop, trip-trop.
6	'WHO TRIPS OVER MY BRIDGE?'
4	roared the Troll.

to reflect the geography of the literature. Remember to exploit different levels and avoid straight lines.

Holding the script

One of the most useful tips I can give is also one of the simplest: make sure that readers don't mask their faces with their scripts! Scripts can not only prevent an audience from seeing important facial expressions and reactions but can also hamper voice projection. However, the 'hiding behind the script' syndrome, common enough with beginners, usually disappears as children become more experienced and confident with the medium.

Audience participation

When you are presenting Readers Theatre to a young audience, or a large group, it is often a good idea to include some sort of participatory activity. This may simply take the form of joining in on a repetitive line or phrase. For example, in Nette

Hilton's wonderful picture book *The Long Red Scarf*, the reader and audience always join together in chorus on the lines, 'The biggest, longest, fuzziest scarf in the reddest red in the whole wide world'. Such repetition abounds in folktales like *The Story of Chicken Licken*, *The Three Little Pigs* and *The Little Red Hen*, providing a point of aural focus and a comfortable sense of predictability for the audience.

Another way to involve your audience is to select a number of children to be 'props' or non-speaking characters. For instance, they might become the pet shop animals in Amanda Graham's classic picture book *Arthur*, or the spider and her web in Eric Carle's *The Very Busy Spider*. However, if participation is to work successfully, you must give your audience clear instructions before the performance begins.

Economy of movement

Remember that Readers Theatre only attempts to create an illusion of action and restrict the movement of readers as much as possible. As I remarked earlier, characters wandering aimlessly across the performance space are distracting both to the audience and the other readers. Any movement they make should be choreographed and have a purpose. Even in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* (to take an extreme example) you can avoid potential mayhem in the rumpus scene by having the Wild Things simply jump and leap on the spot.

Miscues

If a reader misses a line in a performance, the other members of the group should not wait in sweating silence until the child finds the spot. Instead another reader should simply take the line and continue. (It may be a good idea to arrange beforehand for one or two of the more reliable readers to cover any miscues.) Because of the way that Readers Theatre scripts are divided, it is not as obvious to the audience when another reader takes a line as it is in a play.

Props, etc.

I have already warned against using too many props and costumes, and performance may reveal a further, practical problem. When hats, scarves, Viking helmets and ray guns are being juggled along with the script, there is always plenty of scope for confusion. Remember, the raison d'être of Readers Theatre is the language, not the readers.

If you are intending to present a program of Readers Theatre (perhaps during Children's Book Week or Education Week), it's good idea to keep the props and scripts in individually labelled bags – one bag per story. In this way one member of the group can look after the scripts and props, while another supervises the seating arrangements and a third introduces the story. This simple organisation allows for a minimum of fuss and a smooth transition between presentations.

Advertising the source

Although it may appear to be a simple point, readers should always announce the title of the book to be presented, the author and illustrator, the publisher, and the place and date of publication. Wherever possible, it's a good idea to have a copy of the book on hand to make a link in the audience's mind between what is being presented as Readers Theatre and the source literature. Indeed, since one of the main functions of the medium is to promote books, this is especially important, adding a twist to the old cinema slogan: 'You've seen the Readers Theatre, now read the book!'

Intimacy

Readers Theatre is best performed in a medium-sized space where the readers are close to the audience. It is an essentially intimate experience in which there should be no barriers between audience and readers, and so it is best to avoid stages, large halls and microphones. Readers seated on a formal stage sometimes feel a chasm between themselves and their listeners, while the use of microphones takes away some of the warmth and immediacy of the medium – as does the cavernous space of a huge hall. The absence of microphones will also encourage readers to project their voices without shouting, which is a skill that only comes with practice.

THE ADVANTAGES OF READERS THEATRE

Readers Theatre has received little serious attention from educational circles in Australia, and yet the benefits, simplicity and flexibility of the medium make it a very attractive way to encourage a child's enjoyment of literature. Unfortunately, to date, it has been used predominantly as an 'end of year turn' or as an alternative to the assembly skit. While it fits perfectly into these roles, it needs to be seen in a context other than one of pure entertainment in order to reach its full potential as an exciting approach to language.

The success of Readers Theatre in the language classroom is well-documented in the professional literature of the United States, where it has not only been used across the curriculum to teach everything from science and maths to history, but also to present literature from Shakespeare to Roald Dahl. What then are the advantages of integrating Readers Theatre into the language curriculum of Australian classrooms?

§ Readers Theatre can be used with children of any age group and with children of differing reading abilities. Even non-readers can and do participate in Readers Theatre – for instance, as Wild Things in *Where the Wild Things Are* or as Turkey Lurkey in *The Story of Chicken Licken*.

§ The fact that readers use scripts means that rehearsal time is reduced and performance can be almost immediate. Because

READERS THEATRE

COVERS TOTAL LITERATURE SPECTRUM	AN ALTERNATIVE TO STORYTELLING
TIME-SAVING	INEXPENSIVE
PORTABLE	FEW REHEARSALS
REQUIRES LIMITED SUPERVISION	SPRINGBOARD FOR OTHER WRITING ACTIVITIES
PROMOTES READING	EASILY ADAPTED
LITERATURE-BASED	MULTILINGUAL MEDIUM

there are no lines to memorise, children can concentrate totally on the language of the literature.

§ Readers Theatre provides an opportunity for vocabulary learning. As they interpret scripts, children are introduced to new words and ideas. The medium can extend children's language capacities.

§ A team effort is required for Readers Theatre to work, and this promotes co-operative interaction as children make joint production decisions, rehearse together and perform as a group.

§ The spareness of Readers Theatre presentations encourages both readers and audiences to use their imaginations to fill in details of scenery, costume and objects. Coger and White (1982, p. 170) call this image-making power of Readers Theatre 'healthy hallucinating'.

§ Children who might not be able to read a book because of its level of difficulty can still enjoy it in an oral form. I have seen an audience of six- and seven-year-olds entranced by Readers Theatre performances of excerpts from Robin Klein's *The Enemies* and Libby Hathorn's *Looking Out for Sampson*.

§ A Readers Theatre performance can and often does make the audience and the readers want to go back to the original book. I recall one young boy literally ripping a copy of Eleanor Spence's *Deezle Boy* out of my hands after a Readers Theatre presentation during Children's Book Week. He insisted that he had to find out what happened in the rest of the story. His teacher told me later that he had never before shown any interest in reading a book.

§ Presenting a Readers Theatre script to an audience will develop children's self-confidence. They feel more secure working in a group.

From the teacher's viewpoint

As Vivienne Nicoll (1987) has pointed out: 'Readers Theatre is an ideal technique for synthesising all language modes: listening, talking, reading and writing.' Teachers who have used Readers Theatre in the classroom are soon convinced of its potential, not only for the children but for themselves as educators. From a practical teaching point of view its advantages can be summarised quite readily, as in the table above.

Clearly Readers Theatre has many advantages to offer teachers and librarians. Whether you are working at a two-teacher school in the country, a disadvantaged inner-city school, or a well-funded private school, such a flexible medium has a role to play in your classroom.

CONCLUSION

'Readers Theatre is like the Wizard of Oz – in the movie version that is. The real magic cannot be produced until all the pretence, the trickery and the intimidating illusions are dropped. The movie showed us that behind the vaporous mystery there was a simple, good-hearted man whose skill as a teacher did more good for Dorothy and company than the imaginary (and fake) Wizard ever could. So with Readers Theatre ... behind the mystique ... there potentially lies a simple and clear way of involving students in the study of literature. In fact the true

wizardry of Readers Theatre is best seen when the activity is brought into direct contact with the hard realities of the literature classroom.' (Sloane 1977)

Readers Theatre, like many good ideas, is a simple one. As an educational medium it is still in its infancy in Australia, but I believe that a considerable number of teachers have already recognised its vitality and usefulness. It gives children of all ages access to the rarefied inner world of the story. But its most wonderful aspect is that it has the potential, as Taylor (1980) observed, to provide every child with the ability 'to hear, to feel, but before all to see literature – that and no more, and it is everything.'

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